

recreating men

Postmodern Masculinity Politics



Bolton House

**Recreating
Men**
Postmodern Masculinity Politics

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1 Introduction: Men, Masculinities and Feminism

One of the most central issues for women's prospects for equality is whether men can and will change. I believe that men's subjectivity is crucial to gender domination and that changing the social relations of gender will necessitate the transforming of men's subjectivities as well as changing their daily practices. This book will provide an indication of the extent to which this is possible by focusing on the subjectivities and practices of profeminist men, of whom I am one. It is concerned with the questions: What does it mean to be a profeminist man? What is the experience of endeavouring to live out a profeminist commitment? What do these experiences tell us about changing men's subjectivities and practices towards gender equality?

These are questions that have been a personal challenge in my search to understand my place as a white, heterosexual man who is committed to a profeminist position. This commitment arose out of the changes in gender relations that occurred in the 1970s. As someone who was involved in social justice campaigns, I found it relatively easy, at the intellectual level, to see the justice of feminist claims and my own complicity in the oppression of women. At the emotional level, I was deeply threatened by it. Listening to the experiences of women for the first time brought complex reactions from sorrow to outrage and confusion about how to respond. To begin to address these issues, I co-founded an anti-sexist men's consciousness-raising group in 1977. It was during this time that I first started reading feminist theory in an effort to understand what women were saying about men. That was the beginning of a personal, political and intellectual journey in confronting the social construction of white, Western masculinity.

Since 1986 I have been involved in trying to develop a collective profeminist men's politics through co-founding an organization called Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA). MASA has been involved in the organization of forums on gender issues; conducting workshops in schools on anti-sexist masculinity for boys; running workshops and giving public talks educating men about the impact of patriarchy on women's lives; speaking out in the public media about the objectification of women; and organizing campaigns against men's violence. (For a detailed discussion of the development of MASA, see Pease, 1997.)

In giving public lectures on the impact of men's practices on both women and men, I often encounter resistance from men about the validity of feminist analyses. While some of these resistances came from angry anti-feminist men,

many of the negative responses came from men who saw themselves as supportive of women's rights while believing that feminism had gone too far. It was this level of resistance by ordinary men to feminism that has been of most concern to me as an educator and an activist.

In 1993 two other men and I designed a two-day patriarchy-awareness workshop to address these resistances. The workshop used small group discussion and experiential exercises to explore such issues as analyses of patriarchal culture, men's experience of power and domination, alternatives to patriarchal power, the impact of men's domination on women, social and personal blocks to men's ability to listen to women and the visions, obstacles and potential for men to change. The experience of facilitating these workshops further led me to recognize the importance of theorizing the processes by which patriarchal belief systems become embedded in men's psyches and the implications for resistance and change.

Men and Feminism

The antipathy of ordinary men towards feminism is deeply entrenched, as surveys of men's attitudes to the changing roles of women demonstrate. While the majority of men espouse support for equal pay and opposition to men's physical violence, they also tend to be critical of feminism and the women's movement. Walczak's (1988: 129) survey demonstrated that while a minority of men in the United Kingdom hold egalitarian views and an equivalent minority hold traditional views, the vast majority hold views somewhere between 'the extremes'. This is consistent with Townsend's (1994: 271) research where 15 per cent of Australian men identified as anti-feminist, 10 per cent as profeminist and 75 per cent indicated broad support for the goal of equality but were critical of how feminism operates in practice.

Men's main criticisms of feminism from these and other surveys are: that exclusion of men from women's groups and women's organizations is discriminatory; that feminism will erode what are perceived to be fundamental differences between men and women; that women are going the wrong way about trying to achieve their objectives; that feminism has gone 'too far'; that women are now better off than men; and that feminism is anti-male (Franks, 1984; Ingham, 1984; Walczak, 1988; Townsend, 1994).

Many white, heterosexual men are thus unaware that their race, sexuality and gender give them privileges which help perpetuate inequalities. Because many men are unaware of how much the social structure advantages them, they take patriarchy for granted, being more aware of both their burdens and responsibilities than their unearned advantages (Goode, 1982: 137).

Not all men are batterers and rapists, but without 'ordinary' men's participation in routine oppressive practices men's subordination of women would not take the form that it does. Furthermore, because many men's oppressive behaviour is socially accepted as 'normal male behaviour', it can be said to impede their awareness of its oppressive aspects. These instances differ from

more extreme forms of oppression, in that many individual men may be misguided by social norms that permit some oppressive behaviours (Calhoun, 1989: 389–94).

Awareness of men's privileges and socially legitimated oppressive behaviours constitutes the minimal requirement for a progressive men's politics. But what is a progressive men's politics? Some writers refer to 'progressive' practices by men as the 'profeminist wing' of the men's movement. Others talk about a profeminist men's movement, while still others talk about profeminist men becoming a part of the feminist movement. The constituency and location of profeminist politics remains unclear, as does its potential to reach a larger group of men.

My aims in this book are therefore twofold and operate on two different levels: to *theorize* masculinities to inform a profeminist men's politics at both the levels of changing men's subjectivities and challenging the structures of gender domination; and to *enact* strategies that will promote these processes of change. There is a dialectical relationship between these two levels and between the two sites of change. The theoretical investigations and the reflections on practice influence each other, and the methodical and engaged exploration of profeminist men's subjectivities and the dialogues across difference with other individuals and groups are both attempts to link the process of personal transformation to the collective politics of change in gender relations.

Profeminism

Why is it important to study profeminist men? Will their experience tell us anything about the more general resistances of men to the process of change? I believe that there are a number of reasons why profeminist men's experiences are important to study.

First, profeminist men are not exceptional. They still occupy positions of dominance and they continue to embody much of the internalized domination of ordinary men. They are only different through their attempts to confront both their internalized domination and their dominant position. Secondly, profeminist men's awareness of their privilege and their socially legitimated oppressive behaviours are minimal requirements for a progressive politics of change among men. Thirdly, the attempts of such men to change will give some evidence to women as to whether men can potentially become reliable allies in the struggle to transform gender relations more broadly. Fourthly, because these men are attempting to create a collective politics of gender among men, they are, or can be, at the 'cutting edge' in changing dominant masculinities. Finally, such men's experiences give a useful insight into the determinative factors of gender construction and its associated structural components to see whether men who want to change actually can do so.

Little is known, however, about these men and their politics and the contribution they might make to changes in gender relations. This is in spite of

the fact that in recent years there has been considerable empirical research on masculinities and men in gender relations, from both journalistic and academic perspectives. This research has focused on a diverse range of topics including sport, the media, male sexuality, men in families, men at work, men's friendships, intimacy with women, boyhood, adolescence, midlife and ageing and the men's movement.

Significantly though and notwithstanding the fact that studies of fathers and men in the men's movement sometimes express profeminist sentiments, very few empirical studies of explicitly anti-sexist or profeminist men have been undertaken. As I will later demonstrate, most men in these studies are not enacting a profeminist politics. Two exceptions in the literature that most closely parallel my own work are Connell's (1990) study of six anti-sexist men involved in the environment movement and Christian's (1994) life-history interviews with 30 anti-sexist men. While both studies are useful in shedding light on the reasons these individual men became involved in anti-sexist politics, the life-history method does not contribute to a collective politics among such men.

A premise of this research is that profeminist men's experiences constitute a 'submerged voice' within the hegemonic discourses of masculinity. The emergence of profeminist subject positions is an example of what Foucault (1972: 81) calls 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. Profeminist men also constitute a marginal group within patriarchy. Researching the experiences of such a group enables us to identify the formation of new subject positions that provide a 'counter logic to the prevailing modes of domination in society' (Smith, 1992: 496). Thus, the attempts of profeminist men to challenge the patriarchal discourse enable us to clarify aspects of the process of change in gender relations from the perspective of those in the dominant position.

Constructing a Profeminist Men's Standpoint

How valid is a critique of patriarchal dominance from within the experiences of white heterosexual profeminist men? Many currents in feminism argue that we should put more trust in the vantage points of the oppressed and argue that there is good reason to believe that vision is better from below (Haraway, 1988: 583). Theorizing from experience is juxtaposed to the notion that objectivity and distance are the best stances from which to generate knowledge. Instead, it is argued that 'the oppressed can see with clarity not only their own position but also that of the oppressor/privileged and indeed the shape of social systems as a whole' (Frankenberg, 1993: 8). Thus, feminist standpoint theory asserts that to start from women's experiences decreases the partiality and distortion of our images of nature and social relations (Harding, 1992: 181).

For Swigonski (1993: 172, 179), a standpoint involves a level of awareness about an individual's social location, from which certain features of reality

come into prominence and from which others are obscured. According to her, a researcher's standpoint 'emerges from one's social position with respect to gender, culture, colour, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation and the way in which these factors interact and affect one's everyday world'. Researchers are required to reflect upon the implications of their social position for both their motives for undertaking the research and the consequences for the conduct of their research.

There are a variety of standpoint theories that range from essentialist expressions and materialist analyses to postmodern variations. While earlier versions of standpoint theory did have an essentializing tendency, more recent interpretations have located women's experience in concrete, historical contexts. Furthermore, postmodern developments have led to the rejection of a single female perspective and to the acknowledgement of a plurality of female standpoints (Grant, 1993: 91). Thus, there is considerable convergence between recent versions of standpoint theory and postmodernism in that both emphasize multiple interpretations and multiple subjectivities.

What are the implications of postmodern revisions of standpoint theory for profeminist male researchers? If where one 'stands' shapes what one can see and how one can understand it, from what standpoint can profeminist men study masculinity? If, as Harding argues, men also can create anti-sexist knowledge (1992: 178), is it possible to formulate a profeminist men's standpoint to study men and masculinities?

According to Morgan (1992: 29), when dominant groups research their own position in society 'these considerations may be more in terms of justifications than in terms of critical analysis [and] their investigations may always be suspect'. He goes on to raise questions about the extent to which it is possible for men to develop those forms of self-knowledge which could lead to the erosion of male power and privileges.

If, however, men are seen to be locked into an ontological position within patriarchy, what space is left for us to explore our own masculinity? While we cannot individually or as a group 'escape' our material position in the social structure, I believe that we *can* change our ideological and discursive position. The advantage of the notion of standpoint is that it relates to both structural location as well as the discursive construction of subjectivity, allowing us to distinguish between 'men's standpoint' and 'profeminist men's standpoint'. Following Frankenberg (1993: 265), I recognize that there is a substantial difference between the self-conscious engagements of oppressed groups with their own positioning and the self-conscious and self-critical engagement with a dominant position in the gender order. Nevertheless, I still believe that it is possible for men to change their subjectivities and practices to constitute a profeminist men's standpoint.

The process of change is itself a requirement in formulating a profeminist men's standpoint. Men have to change their vantage point if they want to see the world from a different position and this entails more than just a theoretical shift. It also requires men to actively engage in profeminist struggles in

both the private and public arenas, translating in the possibility of a change towards more equal gender positionings.

There is feminist support for the view that it is possible for some men to change in the ways I have outlined and thus escape biological and structural determinism. Harding (1987: 10–11) argues that men can make important contributions to feminist research and she does not believe that the ability or the willingness to contribute to feminist understanding are sex-linked traits. Men can learn to see the world from the perspective of experiences and lives that are not their own and can thus generate knowledge from the perspective of women's lives. If women are not the sole generators of feminist knowledge, men are obligated to contribute to feminist analyses and, in doing so, they must learn to take responsibility for the position from which they speak (Harding, 1992: 183, 188).

While men can contribute to feminist theoretical work, there is a danger that the dominance of men will begin to assert itself on feminist knowledge by theoretical justification as a right. I believe that the most appropriate stance for profeminist men to take is the following: to hear feminist critiques of patriarchy, to research men in light of feminist theoretical insights and developments in methodology, to understand the origins and dynamics of these critiques from 'within' and to make the results of this research available for dialogue and critique, as a basis for working in alliance with women against men's social dominance.

The basis of men's contribution to feminist knowledge (and to their struggles) will be from our specific situation. Men have access to some areas of male behaviour and thought that women do not have. In this sense, women cannot know the 'content of the deliberate strategies that men and male dominated institutions use to maintain their power' (Kelly et al., 1994: 33). When men do research on men, it potentially enables the reader to eavesdrop on privileged consciousness and it reveals how men construct themselves in a dominant position.

On the other hand, there are further dangers when men engage with feminist issues. Reinharz (1992: 16) is appropriately concerned that feminist scholarship is sometimes taken more seriously when men discuss it than when women do. Morgan (1992: 183) has also pointed to the danger of men becoming so successful at deploying feminist methods that they may attract research funding, set up centres and organize journals at the cost of women's endeavours. Such dangers indeed exist but, given that men value masculine authority more highly, I believe that they *should* use it to resocialize men.

In light of the above, while men can support feminism, we cannot *be* feminists because we do not have women's experience (Reinharz, 1992: 14–15). I prefer Wadsworth and Hargreaves's (1993: 5) premise that men can do *pro-feminist* research if they can fulfil certain conditions, including making their work accountable to a critical reference group of women who will determine whether it meets their interests and addresses their problems.

This is not to argue, however, that feminism should set the agenda for men's studies. Men have to take responsibility for the questions that emerge in

their explanations of men and masculinity (Seidler, 1994: 112). While I would agree that some form of accountability by men to women is essential in researching masculinity, this does not involve the relinquishing of responsibility for determining the direction of the research. Making those to whom we are accountable arbiters of practice and research would, yet again, take away responsibility from men. This process of accountability must involve dialogue with women.

Developing a Collective Politics Among Profeminist Men

The strategic concerns of the research – how to inform a profeminist politics among men – invited a collaborative mode of inquiry. It is my view that questions of political strategy are best formulated collectively. Thus, to address the formulated research aims, I invited a number of self-defining, profeminist men to participate in a collaborative inquiry that would take the form of an anti-patriarchal men's consciousness-raising group.

From my involvement in profeminist politics, I drew up a list of 20 men whom I knew personally and who I believed would identify with a profeminist stance. Ten of these men were, at the time of the research, active in MASA; the others were from a range of activist backgrounds including the non-violence movement, perpetrator counselling, 'left' politics, an alternative community and non-sexist educational programmes for boys in schools. Because my focus was on both personal change and political strategy, I believed that it was important to choose men who were in some way taking a public stance with their profeminism. Of the 20 men who attended the initial meeting, 11 men committed themselves to the full project over a period of 15 months and 22 meetings.

The empirical focus of this research was not to present detailed profiles of the participants as individual men. Rather, following Connell (1996: 172), the aim was to elucidate the shared historical situation the participants found themselves in as a group of self-defining profeminist men and to articulate the social logic of their response to that situation.

The early stages of the research involved us in exploring what Pheterson calls our 'internalized domination'. Internalized domination is 'the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others' (Pheterson, 1986). How do we theorize our position as white, heterosexual men? What dilemmas and issues do we face as profeminist men? Is it in men's interests to change? How and why do we develop a progressive anti-patriarchal politics?

What happens when white heterosexual profeminist men reflect upon themselves? To explore our subjectivities we used processes of anti-patriarchal consciousness-raising and collective memory-work (Haug, 1987). Both of these methods encourage participants to reflect upon the ways in which they have accommodated to or resisted hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Many feminists have identified appropriate deconstructive projects for

men, including an examination of men's sexuality (Cicoux cited in Jardine, 1987: 60), why men like pornography (Rich, 1983: 66) and men's relationships with their mothers (Jardine, 1987: 61). An examination of these topics and others are reported in Chapters 5 and 6 of the book.

As we began these discussions, more particular questions of strategies and alliances emerged. How can we relate to feminism and what kind of alliances can be formed with the women's movement? How does homophobia relate to heterosexual masculinity and what kind of alliances can be formed with the gay men's movement? How do we engage critically with the men's movement? Other questions about alliances were also developed in relation to anti-racist groups, trade unions and the labour movement and the peace and environment movements. To address these issues, we adapted Touraine's (1977) sociological intervention method for studying social movements. This method involved us in dialogues with both allies and opponents of profeminism. A detailed discussion of these methodologies is undertaken in the Appendix.

Deconstructing Men, Masculinity and Power

It seems appropriate to alert the reader to the different uses that are made of the concepts of men, masculinity and power in this book.

I problematize the use of 'men' as a generic category because it implies homogeneity. I argue for the importance of identifying differences among men and of specifying *which* men we are talking about. However, I am suggesting that, while acknowledging the differences, it is still relevant to talk of men, in some instances, as a collectivity or at least as an overarching category of human beings. Thus, while avoiding the term as a global category, I continue to use it at times, albeit reservedly, to refer to men as an identifiable aggregation, recognizing that it embraces a multiplicity of experiences, representations and projections.

In relation to masculinity, I reject its singular and normative use as an expression of 'what men are' generically. There are a range of masculinities in society reflecting the differences amongst men fluctuating over time and space and expressing men's ways of living and acting differently.

Masculinity and patriarchy are sometimes fused together, or their semantic fields tend to overlap, because the dominant mode of masculinity is patriarchal and the enactment of this mode reproduces patriarchal structures. By contrast, a premise of this book is that men can enact non-patriarchal masculine subjectivities and thus break the real and implied nexus between men, a normative model of masculinity and patriarchal dominance.

It is frequently proclaimed that one cannot understand men and masculinity without understanding power (Hearn, 1992: 21; Kaufman, 1994: 146). There are, however, many different ways of describing and conceptualizing power. Most writers distinguish between various forms of organizational, institutional and social power on the one hand and the

subjective experience of powerfulness on the other. These distinctions have been articulated in a variety of ways including 'threat power' and 'integrative power' (Boulding, 1990), 'power-over' and 'power-to' (Yoder and Kahn, 1992) and 'outer power' and 'inner power' (Crespi, 1992).

It is said that men tend to conceptualize power as the first set of categories, 'the capacity to impose control on others' (Kaufman, 1993: 146). This form of power is the ability to force opponents to give in for fear of unpleasant consequences. While men may rely more on threat power than integrative power, it is not uniquely masculine, for women can also use power in this way, as evidenced in white women's control over women of colour (Griscom, 1992: 407).

These distinctions help us to understand what Kaufman (1994) refers to as 'men's contradictory experiences of power'. On the one hand, it is widely acknowledged that men dominate most forms of organizational, institutional and social power, thus constituting men's gender power. On the other hand, many men experience feelings of personal disempowerment. While for some men this may be a reflection of their position in class or race hierarchies, for others it is a recognition that their social or institutionalized power may not always correlate with their experience as individual men and their *feelings* of powerfulness.

Many men lack integrative power because they have focused so much on the exercise of threat power (Kupers, 1993: 179). Furthermore, the more inner power a man has the less he will feel the need to control others (Crespi, 1992: 104). These contrasting views of power suggest that men's capacity to impose control on women, albeit exercised differently in different places and in different classes, is not the only form of power. Women's capacity for integrative power, and the capacity to develop 'power-against' (Onyx, 1993: 1) through resistance, means that women are not completely powerless.

This challenge to the notion that men are all-powerful in all aspects of their lives does not lead me to the conclusion reached by Farrell (1993) and others that 'male power is a myth'. In recognizing the importance of other forms of power, I do not deny the phenomenon of institutionalized gender power, nor of class and state power. Rather I suggest that gender power relations can be transformed by both women *and* men in local struggles against the different forms of power exercised at the everyday level of social interactions.

An Outline of the Chapters

In Chapter 2, I critically review debates 'about men' within modernist feminism and theories of masculinity in the new men's studies literature, focusing specifically on men's agency in maintaining or challenging patriarchal social relations. Chapter 3 examines the implications of the current debates within and between postmodernism, critical theory and feminism for the study of men. Chapter 4 describes processes of anti-patriarchal consciousness-raising

with men and illustrates the dilemmas and contradictions facing profeminist men.

The next two chapters draw upon memory-work to explore men's subjectivities and practices. Chapter 5 examines aspects of father-son and mother-son relationships in the context of the current debates on father absence, the father 'wound' and boys' separation from their mothers. In Chapter 6, I examine two social practices that reinforce hierarchical heterosexuality – homophobia and sexual objectification – and explore the potential for heterosexual men to reconstruct their gender and sexual identities in ways that do not involve domination over other sexualities and over women.

Chapters 7–9 outline accounts of dialogues with allies and opponents of profeminism to explore the potential of a collective politics among profeminist men. Chapter 7 examines the political dimensions of the men's movement and the appropriateness of locating profeminist men's politics within it. Chapter 8 explores the potential for alliances between profeminist men, feminist women and gay men. In Chapter 9, I explore the extent to which it is in men's interests to change towards gender equality and consider whether it is possible for men to formulate non-patriarchal interests.

The final chapter draws together the various arguments of the book. I consider the implications for theorizing and changing men's subjectivities and outline methods for working with men towards gender equality.

PART I

THEORIZING MEN AND PATRIARCHY

2 The 'Man Question' in Feminism and the New Men's Studies

How should I, as a man, approach the feminist debate about men? How should men read feminist theory? Of course these are not questions that many men consider because most men, including academic men and members of men's groups, do not read feminist theory at all. While female scholars have to read what both men and women write, academic men feel the need only to read each other (Hanmer, 1990: 24). Many men writing on gender do not acknowledge feminist theory and some writers argue that feminism is about women and has little to say about men (Brod, 1987: 61).

A man who reads feminist theory must respond to the feminist arguments but the question is: How can he respond? Male writers, sympathetic to feminism, and who comment on feminist theory, acknowledge that they confront a series of issues. Men cannot pretend to be impartial. It is questioned whether men can understand the position of women in feminist theory and hence whether they can be of any use to feminism (Smith, 1987: 35). As the writings are mostly intended for women, this introduces subtleties with which most men are unable to cope (Marine, 1972: 11). It is also recognized that men's view of feminist theory must be a view of the surface because they are unable to access the complexities available only to participants (Bouchier, 1983: 90).

Some feminist critics are even more sceptical of the value of men's reading of feminism. Over 25 years ago, Daly (1973: 32) argued that when men study feminism, they do so to gain 'easily exploitable knowledge about women's situation'. Ten years later, Klein (1983: 414) reiterated this view by suggesting that the presence of men in women's studies is a contradiction in terms. More contemporary feminists echo these views. Men are said to study feminism in order to co-opt it and turn it towards their own interests (Marcus, 1988: 100) or to approach it as a topic to 'get on top of' or as a terrain to be 'conquered' and not as a process to which to commit oneself (Sofia, 1993: 36).